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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000567

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: PREL KDEM PTER SY LE IR

SUBJECT: SINIORA BRINGS THE POPE ON BOARD, SAYS "NO" TO
INTERIM AOUN

REF: BEIRUT 506

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 2/22 meeting with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Siniora claimed to have convinced the Vatican to push for President Lahoud's resignation. He said that the Maronite Patriarch and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri are both on board with Lahoud's resignation, but that Michel Aoun still needs to be persuaded that the Baabda Palace is beyond his grasp. Siniora said that Aoun's stated price for ceding Baabda -- a minimum of six cabinet seats -- was not worth paying. Turning to Syria, Siniora said that Damascus is working with the Qataris to facilitate a deal that will ease international pressure on President Asad's regime. Siniora predicted that the SARG would use Lahoud as a bargaining chip to take pressure off itself, and that it would hang him out to dry when the time was right. End summary.

BAABDA AND AOUN

¶2. (C) On February 22, the Ambassador and emboff met with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora at the Grand Serail. The prime minister's comments focused on the Lebanese presidency and the various forces coalescing to push Emile Lahoud from office. As in a previous meeting (reftel), Siniora described his recent trip to Rome and the Vatican as highly successful.

He claimed to have convinced Pope Benedict XVI to pressure Maronite Patriarch Sfeir to take a stronger role in calling for Lahoud's resignation. Siniora said the French would be pressuring the Vatican to take a stand against Lahoud as well.

¶3. (C) Siniora described the overall situation in Lebanon as one where the forces against Lahoud were gaining real momentum. With Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri apparently on board now as well, Siniora said that Emile Lahoud's days in Baabda would be numbered. The only remaining obstacles, according to Siniora, were: 1) to ensure that the Patriarch and Berri keep up the pressure on Lahoud, and 2) to prevent Aoun from playing the spoiler by initiating massive street demonstrations if he does not win the presidency.

¶4. (C) The prime minister described recent suggestions by a chorus of prominent Lebanese politicians, including Elias al-Murr, that Aoun serve as an "interim president" for 18 months following a Lahoud resignation as a gambit to force new Parliamentary elections. Siniiora further criticized the "interim Aoun" proposal, saying that Lebanon needs a strong president with a full six years in office to continue advancing a reform agenda. An interim presidency, Siniiora argued, will only stifle reform efforts.

¶5. (C) Siniiora said that keeping Berri's support should be relatively simple. Describing Berri as a "pragmatist and survivor," the prime minister said that Berri only needs to be reassured that moving against Lahoud now will guarantee him a strong position in Lebanon's volatile political hierarchy. Handling Aoun, however, would be more difficult. Aoun has to realize that he has no chance to be elected president. Regrettably, Siniiora continued, Aoun remains blind and deaf to this fact.

¶6. (C) Therefore, according to Siniiora, if Aoun will not realize he has no chance at becoming president, the only recourse is to convince him to play "by the rules," refraining from initiating unrest and street violence. As for Aoun's stated asking price for foregoing the presidency -- six cabinet positions on the Council of Ministers -- Siniiora dismissed the proposal as "unrealistic" and exorbitantly high, far exceeding its actual representation in Parliament or his actual support on the street. Siniiora closed the topic by once again referring to Aoun as "unbalanced." "Really," the prime minister said, "mentally, he's not right."

SYRIA, TEHRAN AND WMD

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¶7. (C) Turning to Syria, Siniiora said that Damascus was working with Qatar to broker some kind of deal to relieve some of the pressure on Bashar. (Comment: Siniiora had met with the Qatari foreign minister in Beirut earlier that day. End comment.) When the Ambassador asked what Damascus wanted, Siniiora replied that they were trying to open up, and were willing to use President Lahoud as a bargaining chip. According to Siniiora, Damascus realizes that Lahoud is little more than a symbol of their influence in Lebanon, but they will be willing to cut him loose if they think they can benefit from the deal.

¶8. (C) Later in the conversation, Siniiora admitted his concern that Tehran would try to use Hizballah in Lebanon to leverage its position on the development of their nuclear program. Siniiora said he thought Tehran would be rational, but admitted his surprise that they had pushed the stakes as high as they have. He said that a Russian offer to provide nuclear fuel was the best deal that anyone could hope for, but said he was not sure if the Iranians would take it. He speculated that the USG could encourage the Iranians to accept the Russian deal if the administration publicly announced a position calling for all countries in the Middle East to renounce nuclear weapons, (including, of course, Israel).

FELTMAN